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ABSTRACT

A survey of opinion in east-central Wisconsin focused on respondents' perceptions of persons, historical or living, who have made the greatest contribution to the United States. Teachers, other adults, and students responded with the names of two persons who have made the greatest contribution to the United States, one president who has made the greatest contribution to the United States, and two areas that have made the greatest contribution to human endeavor from among business, education, exploration, government, labor, medicine, religion and/or philosophy, science and/or invention, sports, writing, and the fine arts. Students were also asked to note their favorite school subject. Among all respondents governmental leaders predominated in both categories of contributing persons. Science, however, was the area of human endeavor most often cited with education second -- except among students, where education was third and government second. The results may point to a need for rethinking not only what historical figures to include in the social studies but also what areas of human endeavor. (JH)

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HIP PROJECT REPORT

APRIL 1970

WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY-OSHKOSH

(A Graduate Seminar Project Conducted in the Fall 1969 Semester -- for a List of the Project Participants see foot note number 1)

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CHILDREN, TEACHERS, AND OTHER ADULTS EXPRESS THEIR OPINIONS ABOUT HISTORICALLY IMPORTANT PERSONS OF THE UNITED STATES[1]

The teaching of American history usually includes substantial content concerning historical individuals. For example, Guzzetta examined eleven social studies textbooks which were designed for the fifth grade and found that "a total of 206 names of historically significant Americans" were presented in these books.[2] He further found that, of the forty-eight persons found in over half of the textbooks, there were "no literary figures, educators, theologians, physicians, humanitarian reformers, labor leaders, engineers, architects, artists, nor judges."[3]

In an informal study which was conducted by Buckley in 1963 of fifty-one seventh and eighth grade pupils, he found that, when they were asked to list ten men who had had the greatest effect on the world, "almost fifty per cent were great political leaders or national heads of state."[4]

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[1]The research which is reported here was done as a small seminar group project at Wisconsin State University-Oshkosh in the fall 1969 semester. The members of the seminar group were Gerald Christianson, Joan Daggett, Dorene Dufek, Marie Frank, Richard Haley, William Hoban, Lillian Knoespel, Marilyn Maney, Sylvia Patzlaff, Lenora Rosera, Dale Richard Schultz, and James Zieske. The author of this report was the seminar leader.

[2]Charles Guzzetta, "Children's Knowledge of Historically Important Americans," in Current Research in Elementary School Social Studies, ed. by Wayne L. Herman, Jr. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 393.

[3]Ibid., 394.

[4]Richard Dale Buckley, "Children's Misconceptions in Social Studies," in Freedom and Education, ed. by Helen Huus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), p. 119.

These two studies disturb the writer. It would appear that textbooks are leading students to gain a distorted view of "greatness." Greatness appears to be equated with government.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study which is reported here was to determine what were the opinions of teachers, other adults, and students about:

1. persons, historical or living, who have made the greatest contributions to the United States.
2. the United States president who has made the greatest contribution
3. the areas of human endeavor which have made the greatest contributions to the society of the United States.

Procedure Used

The study was limited to respondents in the east-central Wisconsin area. A questionnaire was distributed to 240 adults, 120 teachers, and 240 students. The sample of adults was obtained by taking random names from the telephone directories of seven communities. The sample of teachers was obtained by taking random names from faculty directories of eight school districts. The sample of students was obtained by taking a random selection of twenty students each from twelve selected classrooms in eight school districts. The questionnaires were distributed in November 1969.

The percentage of returns by adults was low. Seventy-five of the 240 which were distributed were returned (31.2%). The returns from teachers were more satisfactory; 86 of 120 were received (71.7%). Results were obtained from all of the 240 students.

The questionnaire asked the respondents to do three things:

1. List the names of the two persons of the United States (historical or living / female or male) who, in their opinion, have made the greatest contributions, for either good or evil, to society.
2. List the name of the United States president who has made the greatest contribution to society.
3. Check the two areas of human endeavor in the list below which have made the greatest contributions to the society of the United States:

    a. Art, Drama, and/or Music

    b. Business

    c. Education

    d. Exploration

    e. Government

    f. Labor

    g. Medicine

    h. Religion and/or Philosophy

    i. Science and/or Invention

    j. Sports

    k. Writing

    l. Other (Please List:_____)

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Information was also obtained from the teachers as to the grade or grades they taught and as to their years of teaching experience. Twenty-five teachers had taught for five years or less; 15 for six through 10 years; 36 for eleven or more years. Twenty-four teachers taught in primary; 35 were intermediate teachers; 10 were junior high teachers; 13 were high school teachers; and 4 were unclassified.

Information was obtained from the children as to their grade level. There were 80 primary grade children; 100 intermediate grade children; 40 junior high children; and 20 higher grade children. As a sidelight to the study the children were asked to list their favorite school subject.

Results

As noted previously, questionnaires were returned by 75 adults, 86 teachers, and 240 students (31.2 per cent, 71.7 per cent, and 100 per cent respectively). Table 1 summarizes the responses to the three major questions. Since there are uneven numbers in each group, the table attempts to weight the criteria for listing a name on it. If 25 children listed a name, 8 adults or 9 teachers would need to list a name to be as important to their total sample.

Abraham Lincoln was the most often mentioned name by teachers, other adults, and students. He leads all lists whether the list is presidents or persons except for one instance where John Kennedy was cited by children as the most outstanding president. Of the ten persons who were most popular as contributors to society, six of them were presidents -- A. Lincoln, F. D. Roosevelt, G. Washington, J. F. Kennedy, R. Nixon, T. Jefferson. Few students (3) listed F. D. Roosevelt as a great contributor, while with adults he was quite popular.

TABLE 1

PERSONS, PRESIDENTS, HUMAN ENDEAVORS CONSIDERED MOST IMPORTANT BY MORE THAN 8 ADULTS, 9 TEACHERS, OR 25 CHILDREN

	Adults (75)		Teachers (86)		Students (240)	
Persons	A. Lincoln	(21)	A. Lincoln	(18)	A. Lincoln	(80)
	T. Edison	(12)	F. D. Roosevelt	(16)	G. Washington	(79)
	F. D. Roosevelt	(9)	M. L. King	(15)	R. Nixon	(43)
	G. Washington	(9)	B. Franklin	(13)	N. Armstrong	(42)
	John Kennedy	(8)	John Kennedy	(10)	John Kennedy	(37)
			T. Edison	(10)		
			T. Jefferson	(9)		
Presidents	A. Lincoln	(24)	A. Lincoln	(37)	John Kennedy	(64)
	F. D. Roosevelt	(17)	F. D. Roosevelt	(14)	A. Lincoln	(59)
	John Kennedy	(12)	John Kennedy	(9)	G. Washington	(53)
	T. Jefferson	(8)			R. Nixon	(37)
Human Endeavors	Science	(41)	Science	(47)	Science	(76)
	Education	(27)	Education	(39)	Government	(65)
	Medicine	(23)	Medicine	(28)	Education	(56)
	Business	(13)	Exploration	(13)	Medicine	(53)
	Religion/Phil.	(13)	Religion/Phil.	(9)	Exploration	(44)
	Exploration	(11)			Sports	(44)
					Art	(30)
					Writing	(26)

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Although governmental leaders were popular in the categories of persons and presidents, government was seventh with adults, sixth with teachers, and second with students. Science was the area of human endeavor that was most popular in all categories of respondents; education was second by teachers and other adults and was third by students.

The 75 adults listed 43 different persons, 10 different presidents, and gave at least one vote to all areas of human endeavor except Art, Drama, and/or Music. The 86 teachers listed 45 different persons, 9 different presidents, and gave at least one vote to all areas of human endeavor. The 240 students listed 63 different persons, 12 different presidents, and also gave votes to all areas of human endeavor.

George Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt were two historical figures who shifted the most in standings when experience and grade of teachers and age of pupils were tabulated. As respondents became older or the grade increased F. D. Roosevelt generally rose in rank, while the reverse was true for G. Washington.

Richard Nixon did not get a single vote by teachers and other adults. Forty-three students listed him as a person and 37 (rank 4) listed him as a president. Most of his support came from the primary grades.

Women received little attention as contributors. Two of the 43 contributors who were listed by adults were women; 6 of 45 by teachers; and 8 of 63 by students. In pooling the results from all respondents, only 12 different women were listed with Clara Barton (10 votes), Helen Keller (8 votes), and Betsy Ross (8 votes by elementary school children) leading the list.

As for Black Americans, only Martin Luther King was listed by respondents. He received 31 votes. He ranked sixth with adults, third with teachers, and eighth with students.

When listing all persons named by at least one adult, one teacher, or one student, one finds 107 different persons. When categorizing these 107 individuals by areas of human endeavor (see Table 2), the researchers note that 33 persons are or were directly associated with government. No other area of human endeavor is represented by more than 10 persons.

The question which was asked of the students as to their favorite school subject was answered by all but 2 of the 240 students. The votes which were received by each subject were as follows:

Mathematics	67
Social Studies	31
Physical Education	27
Reading	26
Art	22
Music	22
Science	18
Spelling	6
Language Arts	5
Industrial Arts	4
Home Economics	3
Psychology	3
Writing	3
Typing	1

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF HISTORICAL FIGURES
IN VARIOUS CATEGORIES OF
HUMAN ENDEAVOR

Area of Endeavor	No. of Persons
Government	33
Exploration	10
Medicine	9
Science/Invention	9
Religion and/or Philosophy	8
Art/Drama/Music	6
Writing	5
Reformers	4
Military	4
Crime	3
Sports	3
Business	2
Labor	2
Education	2
Unclassified	7
Total	107

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The order of ranking was fairly consistent except in junior high where physical education rose to the top and social studies fell to the bottom.

Conclusions

Children, teachers, and other adults generally rate historical figures in much the same way. Particular historical figures may vary but the type of historical figure does not. It would appear that society and the schools have impressed the citizens of Wisconsin with the importance of many governmental leaders. It does not appear, however, that Americans are convinced that government is an area of tremendous contribution to American society.

Although the sample was quite limited and the response, particularly among adults, not too adequate, the results may point to some need for rethinking what historical figures to include in the social studies curriculum. Should not persons who have contributed to wide areas of human endeavor be given more attention in the schools? Should not students be led to formulate some way to evaluate the greatness of various historical figures?